

# New York City Arts in Education Candidate Survey Project

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## Mayoral Candidates

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*The following questions were designed to determine candidates' positions on a number of issues related to the delivery of arts education (including music, dance, theater and visual arts) in New York City public schools. Questionnaires were delivered to all declared candidates for the Office of New York City Mayor.*

### **Candidate: Kevin Coenen**

1. What meaningful experiences, if any, with the arts, either in school or otherwise, did you have in your life and what did you gain from these experiences?

I can think of a few meaningful experiences with the arts that I have had throughout my lifetime. Early on, I played the trumpet in band. I recently had a chance to relive this experience with my son, as he has taken up the trumpet as well. Being in band sparked my interest in music and to this day, I have enjoyed playing another instrument for the past 32 years, my guitar.

The relationship that develops between a son and his father, as they go through the motions of teacher and student, trying to get a grasp of the notes, the sounds and the theory behind the music, helps bond them. This relationship creates a base for working together to achieve a goal. At first, it seems as though creating music is too difficult a task, but as both father and son work together to create a sound that's worth listening to, the child realizes that he can take instruction from someone and learn to do something that seemed impossible to do. The child can use music to gain valuable learning techniques.

I mentioned the guitar. I originally learned guitar on my own, but later on in life I took lessons and went on to become a band leader and organizer. We rehearsed and formed a band and played on Bleecker Street in New York City for three years. I always kept in mind my humble start as a trumpeter. What I gained from this experience was a sense that I could add to what I was already learning in school and handle the extra workload. That I could attend school and also work at other things and become successful at something that I enjoyed doing as well. It made school more enjoyable to be part of a band and create music, something that I liked already. No one had to stand over me and make me want to learn it. I already had the desire to master it. The arts are very important and meaningful in a child's early development.

2. It is widely acknowledged that access to a well-rounded curriculum is a key component of a quality education. However, numerous studies show that over the past decade disciplines such as art, science, and social studies are getting crowded out of the school day. In New York City, for instance, only half of all elementary schools are providing the arts instruction that is outlined in state education law. What strategies do you envision for broadening the school-day curriculum?

Some of the strategies that I envision for broadening the school-day curriculum are reversing the trend of school closings and giving children more room to grow in a less crowded environment. I think education is the biggest part of what makes government accountable to the people who have elected their officials. The children voices are not heard loud enough. I sincerely believe that if the government cannot give the children an environment that is enjoyable and comfortable, then whatever it is our government is

doing needs to be changed. The school day curriculum can't only teach hard subjects, or subjects that don't include either drawing or acting in a play or playing a musical instrument. Kids want to play. They want to be kids. A school day that doesn't include the arts isn't a school day. It isn't a day that is enjoyed or creates a desire to want to return to. My son gets up in the morning quicker when it is a day that his band is meeting early on. Due to time constraints the band meets before school. You can see the desire he has to get to school when that band is scheduled. I believe he shouldn't have to do that on his own time, but that it should be done as a part of his learning experience, as a whole. All politicians use education as a rally cry, as a sticking point on how they would like to change things but as we know, soon after getting into office, how quickly they forget. The arts should be something that can be chosen by a student and supported by the school system to make a child's learning experience an enjoyable one. My strategy is one of making the government accountable to the people they serve.

3. How, if at all, would you restructure the current system of school governance? How might this impact the delivery of arts instruction in city schools?

Restructuring the school governance is a difficult task. There have been many attempts to try and create a system that works in New York City. I believe that the current system, as it relates to the charter system, divides the students into two separate groups and creates a sense of a "separate but equal" atmosphere, something that was outlawed many years ago. I think that when you have two different levels of education in one structure you can't have equal education for all of the students. I think education should reflect on your neighborhood and where you live. All of the students in a community should be given the same educational opportunities. It is unfair to send one student to a charter school and receive a better education than another student, who must attend a public school with less support. All schools should be able to recognize the needs of special education students and better achieving students and deal with them in a way that reflects the needs of the community. No community should be divided up and parents made to apply to receive a better education at another school when the school in their community should insure that their children receive the proper education. The arts must be included as an important part of bringing together the children, on a level where they can interact as equals and learn to get along with each other as they create and express themselves. The current system of governance must be made to treat every child as important and that child must be given the best possible education that he/she is entitled to. Parents are paying for it and they should get what they pay for.

4. The arts are recognized as a core subject area here in New York and at the federal level. However, while many schools in New York City do provide quality arts instruction, access to this instruction is far from universal. How would you ensure equity in the delivery of arts education in the following key areas:

A. Funding: Principals consistently cite budget constraints as the chief obstacle to providing arts education at their schools. While schools receive "Supplemental Arts Funding" each year (formerly known as Project Arts), as of 2007 principals are not required to spend these funds directly on arts education. What would you do to ensure that every school in the city has the resources to provide every student with a quality education that includes the arts?

As this question is stated and leads one into the answer, that is the only answer that can be derived, Supplemental Arts Funding should be required to be spent on the arts. My main platform is the misappropriation of funding. It bothers me when the government can find the funding to backstop large projects that should be paid for by corporate interests or private entities but it can't seem to fund the educational system that the taxpayers money is designated for in the first place. There is no accountability. Funds are spent and nobody knows just where these funds go. What I would do is oversee the agencies that are supposed to regulate the resources and make sure they are designated

to go to the intended destination. Since I have children I can relate to their needs. The current administration has a terrible record as it pertains to education. Something needs to be done because the children can no longer wait.

**B. Qualified Instructors:** Highly qualified certified arts teachers are the cornerstone of a quality arts program in schools. However, whether due to budget constraints, school size, or other factors, almost 20% of city schools have no certified arts instructor on staff. How could the city ensure that all of our public school students receive instruction from qualified instructors?

The bottom line is to offer a program that includes the arts as a required subject. Unless art teachers are offered competitive salaries, they won't apply for the jobs. The City of New York isn't reflecting the potential it has right now. It isn't reflecting the amount of revenue it generates. I refuse to believe that we cannot do much better than we are doing right now. Education will be a top priority if I am elected.

**C. Space:** Lack of available in-school arts space is one of the top challenges principals face in implementing arts education. What policies would you implement to prevent the loss of arts spaces in public schools due to overcrowding, co-location, or other factors?

Reverse the trend in school closures is the answer to that question.

**D. Partnerships:** New York City has a rich array of cultural resources, including arts and cultural institutions and professional artists that play an important role in the lives and education of some of our school children. How would you ensure that all public school students and their families could enjoy meaningful engagement with these resources?

Fund interaction with the available resources. Invite artists into the educational system. Sponsor trips to plays and activities. Enroll corporations to donate their funds to allow for meaningful outings. One idea that I describe in the book that I wrote, called Running, is the lottery system that is available now. I think it needs an overhaul. Millions of dollars could be used to revamp the school system and I don't think that this lottery system that we have now is firing on all cylinders. The balance sheet for the City of New York has to be audited because I know that the money that was pouring through the World Trade Center reconstruction was corruption gone rampant. It just doesn't make sense to me that billions of dollars were spent and for 11 years nothing was getting done down there. Where did that money go? It could have been used to keep schools, hospitals, firehouses and basic facilities open. If elected, I plan on revisiting the balance sheet of the past administration and see how responsible the past administration was on spending taxpayer money.

**5. The city's accountability system places a heavy emphasis on student performance on state assessments in English language arts and math. Currently, performance assessments for the arts are being piloted in city schools and while the arts can potentially factor into a high school's report card grade, the overall impact is minimal. Are there ways you would consider expanding or revising the school accountability system to incorporate the arts?**

I think that there is enough pressure on children to perform as it stands now. The workload they are subjected to at this time is heavy. To put more pressure on them isn't a good idea. The arts should be fun. A pass/fail system would be more appropriate giving the kids some leeway. I think it would discourage kids and parents, if they are given the added stress of having to get a high grade to participate in the arts.

6. How would you engage teachers, parents, the arts and cultural community, city agencies, and other interested stakeholders to expand access to arts education both in-school and outside of the school day?

Competition and awards for achievement in the arts.

Additional comments?

I have been a fireman in the F.D.N.Y. for over 19 years. I became a lieutenant towards the end of my career and I have been in many schools during my tenure. Life is a precious thing. I cannot tell you how many tragedies I have witnessed over my lifetime. Our government is not doing enough to answer to the basic needs of the citizens of this city and that is why I am running for this position. I know that unless we put a leader in the position of Mayor, nothing is going to come from this election. Someone will have to stand up for the children of this city. I would like that person to be me. I believe the arts are very important in a child's life and should be stress free and fun. I would like to thank you for including me in your inquiry and I hope the future is bright for the system of education that will include significant changes and upgrades in regards to arts education.

**View all the responses from  
candidates online at [nycartsed.org](http://nycartsed.org)!**